

The Axis Mundane

The most famous person to come from my home town of Sutton in Surrey was Quintin Crisp author of "The Naked Civil Servant".

Sutton is one small part of a larger area which stretches across North Surrey and South London. When I was born there in 1953 it was still Surrey but in 1965 it was given a dual identity of being a London Borough with a Surrey postal address.

The centre of Sutton is the crossroads where some trickster ***crossroads demon*** in former times erected the Cock Hotel.

The old "Cock Hotel" sign still stands, long after the actual hotel has disappeared into the ghost world of history. That crossroads is where the North-South thoroughfare of Sutton High Street is crossed by the East-West line of Cheam Road on one side and Carshalton Road on the other.

Like everywhere else in human habitation the area is a palimpsest of ghost worlds permitted to maintain some psychic interference pattern with the present day waking world.

By the side of the Carshalton Road was a huge white hole in the ground called The Chalk Pit.

Chalk quarrying was one of the local industries. That chalk pit has, in more recent times, been filled in and covered by a B&Q store.

My bit of Sutton was Belmont, a village on the side of the North Downs. I went to school in North Cheam. The whole area of Sutton and Cheam was served by red (and in some places green) London Transport buses.

In the 1950s all of Britain loved the radio and television comedian Tony Hancock whose fictional character, written by Galton and Simpson, lived at the fictional address of East Cheam Railway Cuttings. In reality "East Cheam" is called West Sutton and the spot next to West Sutton railway station is occupied by the corner where Sydney Street meets St. James Street, the intersection of Sydney and James.

Harry Secombe, another 1950s radio star, came from Swansea in Wales but he chose to live in Sutton, on Cheam Road. Dedicated to him there is now a Secombe Theatre in Sutton. The senior school I attended was called Cheam County Secondary School and was located in Chatsworth Road. The school still exists but is now called Cheam High School. The school symbol still has the same picture of a phoenix rising from the flames above the motto "UNDAUNTED".

In former times there was a posh school in Cheam. That school relocated to Hampshire in 1934 but is still named The Cheam School. King Charles the Third and his father both went there. There is also an opulent stately home called "Chatsworth" in Derbyshire. Chatsworth

Road, the school I went to, was nothing like either of those places. It was a very rough and ready, cheap and cheerful 1960s comprehensive school.

My childhood role model of style and attitude was Patrick McGoohan as "The Prisoner". A protagonist forced to live every day in a place where they made him wear a blazer and answer questions.

I did an early morning paper round seven days a week, went to school in Cheam five days a week and attended Air Training Corps parades twice a week in the evenings.

To the North were Rose Hill and Morden and then Wimbledon. On a bicycle, depending on which road you took at South Wimbledon underground station you could get to Central London either by way of Putney or by way of Tooting and Clapham.

The road from Wimbledon Village across Wimbledon Common and Putney Heath towards Putney Bridge leads you to Tibbet's Ride and Tibbet's Corner, often believed to be named after a highwayman who lived and died there, hanged for his crimes. He was a fictional character it seems and, while genuine highwaymen surely did rob coaches on the heath, Tibbet was riding through the endless roads of Neverland, an imaginary man named after the place rather than the other way around.

The area around South London and North Surrey and Kent is a crossroads of continual ongoing war between the world of standardised boring routine and the world of history where real human lives play out their own gut wrenching dramas and struggles.

Quintin Crisp showed us one story from that battlefield. Hanif Kureishi's "Buddha of Suburbia" gives us another view into the struggle to live our lives, to get somewhere and to escape from being smothered by routine, convention, mildness and uniformity. Bromley, Chislehurst, Croydon, East Grinstead, Carshalton Beeches, Sutton, Cheam, Epsom, Ewell, Merton, Morden, Rose Hill. Surrey, Kent, Middlesex, London.

The Battle of Britain was fought in the sky above Kent and Surrey and Hitler waited in vain for for Britain's defences to be destroyed so that "Operation Sea Lion" could proceed.

H. G. Wells lived in this zone of dreaming, specifically in Woking and Worcester Park. Was it the boredom of suburban life that caused Wells to bring in Martian invaders to destroy the whole lot of it? Just blow the whole bloody place to perdition! Tripod war machines blasting at the rows of streets and the monoculture they represent? Dulwich, Greenwich, Snodland, Herne Hill, Peckham, Clapham, Tooting, Wimbledon, Richmond-Upon-Thames. The model upon which the whole world would be remade by the British Empire. In "The Eve of the War" Wells compares the Martian assault upon the South East of England to Britain's genocide of the aboriginal population of Tasmania.

David Bowie emerged from the subterranean depths of Chislehurst bringing us the Spiders from Mars and, following in his footsteps, came the Bromley contingent of punk rockers, desperately trying find something exciting and somehow make something happen.

Mark Twain's fantasy "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" came out a few years before "The War of the Worlds" and shows us King Arthur and his Knights, the epitome of

English chivalry, being torn asunder by the introduction of advanced weapons of war, Gatling guns and barbed wire and explosives, making Twain a prophet of the 20th Century World Wars. Perhaps Palimpsests can work both ways, with past and future casting shadows and reflections upon each other.

Alan Moore and Mitch Jenkins' biography of Steve Moore "Unearthing" takes us into the "ghost crust" dimensions of Shooters Hill and the stretch down south-eastwards into oriental Kent.

"Oriental" because anywhere east of Greenwich is in the Eastern Hemisphere thanks to the 7th Astronomer Royal, Sir George Biddell Airy, who, in 1850 built the large Transit Circle Telescope which divides all of time and space into two neat halves, making the whole multiverse a much more manageable place. In 1884 the Prime Meridian of Planet Earth was defined according to this telescope.

It was not the largest telescope in the world. That honour went to the "Leviathan" telescope in my mother's home town of Birr, in County Offaly, Ireland. Designed and built by the Third Earl of Rosse and used to discover the spiral nature of some galaxies. The big Birr telescope remained the largest in the world for many years and anyone who wanted the clearest view of galaxies had to travel to Birr until, eventually, the Americans built a larger one in California.

Nevertheless, it was the Greenwich telescope which was used to make the whole world into clearly defined halves of space and time split by an East-West meridian.

For millennia human lives have interacted with the shape into which the Earth's crust has settled and the forces which are embedded in these geological forms. We have dug for iron and copper and tin and planted our crops and followed the waterways and the hillsides, building gradually our civilisation. Fighting our battles and invoking our gods, until eventually slicing all of time in two with a telescope.

In "A Splendid Pillar", Alby Stone's deep study of the Axis Mundi, we learn that the pillar, or tree, or mountain at the centre of so many ancient stories from around the world is not only a mythic object holding up the sky but also a place where it becomes possible to communicate with or cross over into other worlds.

I think it can easily be understood that science theories of "The Big Bang" are myths constructed in the same manner and that the applications of science to the technology and engineering of the real world have given us the new religion of the time clock, the calendar, the diurnal schedule as magical objects within the world created by the industrial revolution and the time of the steam train.

The middle class suburban question "What time do you get up at in the morning?" becomes meaningless to anyone who is usually on rotating shifts, sometimes getting up in late evening or in the middle of the night. And the same question, if put to a rural peasant of pre-industrialisation times, might be met with the answer "At sunrise" or "When the cock do crow" or "When 'tis time".

Nevertheless, we now live in our post-industrial world of time clocks. Business is done on global time zones and websites and multiple stock exchanges. This is our "reality". Our "real

world” and “real time”. Where everything depends upon the value of currencies which were once cattle and goats, then became pieces of metal, then pieces of paper and are now binary units of information in the ether.

Back in my old home town of Sutton the sign of the cockerel still stands above the crossroads to tell us, each and every one, that time is lord and king over all in the world of civilisation. **The Axis Mundane.**